

Flying in Subcontinent, an Early History

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Flying came quickly in Sub Continent, the world's first official airmail was carried on 18th February 1911 when French pilot Henri Piquet flew Humber biplane from Allahabad to Naiai Junction across River Jumna a distance of 5 mile with 6500 letters. The First Indian Ace, **Indra Lal Roy** was the most accomplished of all Indian pilots who flew during the First World War. Born in Calcutta on 2nd December 1898, this gallant flyer was only 16 when the war broke out in Europe. He had been a student at St. Paul's School, Kensington, London since May 1911 and left to sign up for the Royal Flying Corps as soon as he reached military age in April 1917. He was granted a commission in the service as 2nd Lieutenant. On 5th July 1917, a few months short of his 19th birthday. Five days after commissioning into the service, Roy moved to Vendrome for flying training. And after a stint at the Gunnery School at Turnberry, Roy was posted to No. 56 Squadron on 30 October 1917. Between the 6th of July and the 19th of July 1918 the 19 year old was credited with ten victories. In just over 170 hours of flight time. On the morning of 22 July 1918, three days after scoring his final victory, this gallant young man was killed in action when his plane went down in flames over Carvin during a dogfight. He was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross on 21st September 1918, the first Indian ever so honoured two other Indians were also given commission in RFC they were HS Malik (the very first Muslim flyer of India) and Lieutenant Welinker. In 1914 a Central Flying School was established at Sitapur it was later abandoned and it joined RFC detachment at Mesopotamia in November 1914, the remainder of the School was sent to Egypt. In 1915 RFC's No. 1 Reserve Squadron formed the Nucleus of 31 Squadron which arrived at Bombay on 26th December 1915 with five BE. 2C, it's A Flight flew to Nowshera and later moved to Risalpur on 1st March 1916, in November 1916 the squadron moved to Risalpur with flights operating at various places.

End of WW1

By the end of Great War, Royal Air Force had assume the policy of deterrent through airpower in Middle East and North Western Frontier thus further squadrons arrived in India equipped with DH-9A air craft by mid thirties there were six such squadrons. In 1918 first flight from England to India via Egypt took off on 29th November and landed at Karachi on 12th

December 1918, crew consisted of Captain Ross and Major General Salmond. Peshawar, Kohat, Risalpur and Karachi were the initial air fields. Razmak (1935), Miranshah, Samungli (1922) were all constructed before the Second Great War mainly to counter the tribes as well as being part of Great Game. In 1921 a flying school was opened for a short time at Quetta equipped with Bristol and Avro 504Ks. Also on 28th March 1921 the Indian legislative passed the bill for the gradual Indianisation of armed forces.

Kabul Evacuation

In 1929 the world's first mass evacuation of civilians took place when 549 people were evacuated from Kabul to Risalpur. Regular commercial flight from England–India was inaugurated on 30 March 1929; it used to took seven days for 4130 miles. In 1930, the year Lahore Flying Club was Opened, six Indian officers were sent to England for flying course, the first five pilots commissioned into the IAF were Harish Chandra Sircar, Subroto Mukerjee, Bhupendra Singh, Aizad Baksh Awan and Amarjeet Singh. A sixth officer, S N Tandon had to revert to ground duties as he was too short. All of them were commissioned as Pilot Officers in 1932 from RAF Cranwell. The Indian Air Force (IAF) was established with the passing of the Indian Air Force act on October 8th, 1932. Accordingly, IAF's No.1 Squadron came into being on April 1st, 1933¹ It was formed as 'A' Flight of IAF at Drigh Road Karachi; the same year Mount Everest was first flown over by Flight Lieutenant Intyre and Marquis of Clydesdale. Initially, the IAF consisted of five Indian pilots, one RAF Commanding officer, Flight Lieutenant (later Air Vice Marshal) Cecil Bouchier and four Westland Wapiti biplanes serial number J9735, K9854, K1263 and K1272. At that time there was a prerequisite of 39 inches leg length as medical standard for the pilots. Simultaneously 22 technicians were also selected as having railway work shop experience as good enough to handle aircraft, they underwent technical course at Karachi on 19 January 1932. These technicians were known commonly as 'Hawai Sepoy'. In April 1936 the B Flight was formed and A Flight was moved to Peshawar where already 20 Squadron RAF was deployed. The No. 1 Squadron later moved to Chaklala in November 1936 to join No. 5 Squadron RAF, its flights operated at Miranshah finally the squadron assembled at Ambala on 3rd July 1938, its C Flight was raised at Drigh Road Karachi in the previous month.

WW2

In September 1939 the second Great War began and expansion of Indian Air Force took place, a flying training set up was established at Risalpur. The training pattern of IAF also included an initial training of 10 weeks for the cadets at Lahore (No 1 Initial Training Wing)

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Ray Sturtivant, *Aviation News*, 24th February-8th March 1984, pp-884-889.

where they were taught drill and military discipline later it was transferred to Poona and duration was increased to 14 weeks and extended to 18 weeks in 1943. Abinitio flying training was the responsibility of No. 1 & 2 Indian Elementary Flying Training Schools located at Begumpet (Hyderabad) and Jodhpur respectively, the duration was 10-12 weeks in which ground subjects and flying training was imparted. From here the cadets would move to No. 1 Indian Flying School at Ambala where cadets initially underwent ten weeks of flying followed by twelve weeks of advanced flying training and then posted to the squadrons, civilian flying schools were also utilised for training of IAF pilots, another small initial flying set up was established at Risalpur with few Tiger Moths but it was disbanded in 1941. An armament training unit was formed at Drigh Road for providing training for pilots and observers but this was also closed in 1941 and training was shifted to Peshawar where a new No. 1 Armament Training Unit was established, a parachute training school was also established on 22nd September 1941 near Delhi at Willingdon Airport initially known as Air Landing School. Japanese attack on Burma and air raid over Calcutta forced the British to built over 200 new airfields especially in depth of India thus Dhamial, Rahwali, Gurkha, Multan, Fatehjang, Sargodha, were constructed in this back ground. In 1942 all civilian flying schools were closed and aircraft taken over for anti aircraft cooperation flying² on 1st April 1942 No 1 Operational Training School was set up at Risalpur for conversion of Hart and Lysander aircraft pilots onto Hurricanes and in November 1942 No. 152 OTU was formed at Peshawar to undertake bomber conversion, training commenced in January 1943 and by May same year the unit had 33 Venegeance and six Harvard aircraft along with six target tugs, to cater for heavy bomber training No. 1584 Conversion Flight was established at Salbini near Calcutta

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Ibid.